



# THE AGENDA-SETTING ROLE OF MAINSTREAM HINDI CINEMA: THE STUDY OF AAMIR KHAN'S SELECTED MOVIES

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## ABSTRACT

Bollywood has gained currency with the passage of time and it happens to be the sole entertainment provider for millions of viewers in the country. Hindi films have enriched the people with thought-provoking and value-loaded temperament and as far as Aamir Khan's movies are concerned it supplied messages and energised cinema goers due to its varied plots, style, ideas or texture of stories, and multi-dimensional characteristics played by him on the silver screen. Aamir Khan's movies leave an emotional effect on viewers and inculcate something which seems to be lacking in Hindi cinema these days. The primary objective of the paper is to study the three selected movies of Aamir Khan which tend to set the agenda of mainstream Hindi cinema. The present paper is an attempt to study three different movies of Aamir Khan which is inclined to pave the way to set the agenda in accordance with the messages hidden in the themes and plots of these movies under study. The researcher has purposefully selected these movies as *Sarfarosh* – a suspense-thriller movie, *Dil Chahta Hai* – a trendsetter movie, and *Mangal Pandey* – a historical movie, owing to their heterogeneous and multifarious stories. As the selected movies tried to shape public opinion and enlighten viewers due to its wide-ranging plots and themes, the agenda-setting role was unearthed. The study revealed that Aamir Khan's movies appear to set the agenda of Hindi cinema by employing different plots and characters in his movies. Moreover, Aamir Khan's movies seem to have bridged the gap between commercial and art cinema as his films supposed to have an artistic approach and commercially-driven predictability alike. The manifestation of the suspense-thriller proposition, trendsetter slant, and historical perspective were quite evident to substantiate that Aamir Khan's movies set the agenda of mainstream Hindi cinema in a distinctive and exclusive manner.

**KEYWORDS:** Agenda Setting Role, Hindi Cinema, Hindi Films, Bollywood, Aamir Khan.

## INTRODUCTION:

Aamir Khan started to glitter in the Hindi film industry in the late 1980s. Though he commenced his film career as a child artist in a home production produced and directed by Nasir Hussain, titled 'Yaadon Ki Baaraat' in 1973 and 'Madhosh' in 1974. Aamir Khan began his professional career eleven years later with *Holi* (1984) and had his first commercial success with *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (1988). He earned his first National Film Award as a Special Jury Award for his roles in the films *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* and *Raakh* (1989).

He has always been a perfect combination of critical acclaim and commercial box office success. Be it the critically acclaimed movie 1947 – *Earth* or the super box office success *Raja Hindustani*, Aamir has always tried to do something new in each of his films and the expectations of movie viewers and film critique for his films went on increasing.

Through the films of Aamir Khan right from *Rangeela* and *Ghulam* in the 90s till today, he is copied, imitated by a large number of audience. This can be attested through the examples of his movies which is associated with the 'look' that the star is bolstering in his films. For instance, after the release of *Dil Chahta Hai*, people started keeping 'goatees' like Aamir Khan, this had become a trend for a long time. Likewise, in *Ghajini*, he had a unique shaved head, which became the next trendsetting hairstyle after *Dil Chahta Hai* (Thomas, 2017).

The actors represent shared cultural values and attitudes, and promote a certain ideology. The semiotic beauty gleaned up by the audience through movies add beauty to the popularity of the actor. The idealistic perception adopted by Aamir Khan in his movies makes him a versatile actor of Bollywood. He is also recognized for sustaining a decisive balance between critical and commercial films.

Keeping this ideology in mind, he has starred in several films depicting different characters, coming from all facets of life, painting every character with equal proportion and enthusiasm. Aamir has tried to shape the mindset of cinema-goers by delivering a new direction to method acting. Aamir seems to have rejuvenated himself by moving from purely romantic roles to serious emotional roles, and from comedy to action. The roles he played on the silver screen had different shades – from the college boy to the young father and the *tapori* (vagabond street boy).

Since *Rangeela*, Aamir has been doing enchanting and thrilling roles. Through these characters, he also hurls questions to the state and displays to us his national fervor. He questions the system, early nationalistic fervor was quite evident in the film '*Sarfarosh*' (2001), where he played the honest ACP officer Ajay Singh Rathore. The film dealt with an Indian police officer and his fight against cross border terrorism. The film was released at the time of the Kargil war, in times of the tumultuous relations between India and Pakistan (Thomas, 2017).

*Dil Chahta Hai* is definitely one of those movies of Aamir Khan that has the potentiality of being fresh and young for years and on. Even 15 years after the release of the movie, one can't enjoy the many subtleties, one cannot get sub-

merged in the subdued emotions of the characters, and one just can't not pretty much love the overall narrative. Not only does he talk about the style of filmmaking used by Farhan Akhtar in his directorial debut, he also analyses the story arch, the characters and the overall tone of the film (News18.com, 2016).

Both *Lagaan* and *Dil Chahta Hai* released in 2001, and there was a four-year gap before Aamir had another release. Coincidentally, the next film he was part of was also from the pre-Independence era but based on real incidents this time. Aamir starred in *Mangal Pandey: The Rising*, in the titular role of the soldier whose mutiny led to the First War of Independence for India. Aamir Khan's 2005 film helped advance the legend of *Mangal Pandey*, the Indian sepoy who was executed on April 8, 1857, for rebelling against the British. *Lagaan* is probably the biggest milestone in Aamir Khan's career. The film not only stirred emotions across the nation but also made ripples internationally. Aamir played village boy Bhuvan who becomes the torchbearer of hope against the brutal British rule in this fictional film set in the pre-Independence era.

Therefore, Aamir Khan deems fit to be called as the epitome of the 'thinking actor' of Bollywood. He became the face of change of Hindi cinema. Aamir Khan's movies appear to have set the agenda of mainstream Hindi cinema as Bollywood has witnessed a paradigm shift since the inception of his art-cum-commercial movies.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

- To corroborate the assumption that Aamir Khan's movies set the agenda of mainstream Hindi cinema;
- To ascertain the critical as well commercial aspects in the roles played by Aamir Khan on the silver screen;
- To observe the role of Aamir Khan for the sustainable development of Bollywood.

## HYPOTHESIS:

1. Tied in different plots, threads, and themes, '*Sarfarosh*', '*Dil Chahta Hai*', and '*Mangal Pandey – The Rising*' tend to set the agenda of Hindi film industry.
2. *Sarfarosh* exudes hyper-nationalism as the film is choked with nationalistic fervor.
3. Based on the thematic treatment of urban culture, *Dil Chahta Hai* intends to become a trendsetter movie of popular Hindi cinema.
4. A hot-headed reactionary *Mangal* played a historical role of the flagbearer of change which triggered India's Independence movement in the fictional movie *Mangal Pandey – The Rising*.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The researcher had adopted the methodology of the Content Analysis by select-

ing the most dynamic, historic, and interesting Hindi films of Aamir Khan which paint his character in multiple characteristics on the silver screen. Qualitative analysis was undertaken to ascertain the agenda-setting role of Aamir Khan's movies. To fulfill it, three films having different screenplay, storytelling, tone and style of presentation were selected for the study. All the selected movies of Aamir Khan substantially set various agendas for mainstream Hindi cinema.

Selection of three definite films of three different roles was the key apparatus behind the selection of the movies under study. To conduct an ingeniously subtle, prodigiously sound, and intriguingly artful review of the movies was to watch the movies and distinguish the different roles played by Aamir Khan in the movies under study. After having a qualitative evaluation of the movies under study it has been established that Aamir Khan's movies set the agenda of mainstream Hindi cinema in a most appropriate manner.

### Agenda-setting Role of Aamir Khan's movies

#### 1. Sarfarosh: Genre – Suspense-thriller:

“Phir kabhi kisi Salim se mat kahna yeh mulk uska ghar nahin.” Twenty years ago, John Matthew Mathan made a taut thriller on cross-border terrorism called Sarfarosh. Deftly steering clear of hyper-nationalism, the Aamir Khan-Naseeruddin Shah starrer released in April 1999, a month before the Kargil conflict, to critical and commercial success. In 2019, it's difficult to imagine a Sarfarosh 2 (Biswas, 2019).

The film opens with a view of the vast expanse of the Thar desert in the Indian state of Rajasthan. The credit sequence outlines the infiltration of arms and ammunition from Pakistan across the international border into Rajasthan, India. The arsenal makes its way through numerous couriers and gun runners before a part of the consignment end up in a tribal hamlet in a forest in peninsular India near the town of Chandrapur. A local criminal and gun runner Bala Thakur delivers the weapons to a renegade forest dwelling tribal leader, Veeran (Govind Namdeo) who intends to unleash terror and establish his hegemony in the region. Soon after a bus carrying a wedding party is intercepted by Veeran and his henchmen and the occupants are looted and then massacred. The incident sends shockwaves across the country and a stunned political leadership reacts swiftly by assigning the investigation to a special operative team of Mumbai Police Crime Branch. The team lands in Chandrapur and during routine investigations unearth a possible link between the massacre and Bala Thakur, who fled earlier after being warned of the teams impending arrival.

The scene shifts to Ajay Singh Rathore's (Aamir Khan) residence in Colaba, Mumbai and him attending a concert by the famed Pakistani vocalist Gulfam Hassan (Naseeruddin Shah) where he spots a familiar face, Seema (Sonali Bendre). Ajay and Seema had attended the same college in the University of Delhi and had mutual affections for each other. During the concert there are intermittent flashbacks to Ajay and Seema's past in Delhi and the tragic turn of events when Ajay loses his elder brother to a terrorist attack in retaliation for Ajay's father (Akash Khurana) agreeing to testify against some terrorists in the court; his father who was abducted is dumped outside his house badly beaten up that leaves him partly paralysed. The grief-stricken family moves to Mumbai where Ajay's kaka (uncle) runs an establishment and Ajay metamorphoses into a determined young man, who devotes himself to becoming an IPS (Indian Police Service) officer. As an ACP (Assistant Commissioner of Police), he makes a good reputation for himself as an honest, tough, and diligent cop. Ajay and Seema meet at the end of the concert and cautiously rekindle their relationship. Seema, whose elder brother was the organizer of the concert, introduces him to Gulfam Hassan and after Ajay hands over a recorded collection of Gulfam's earliest recitals, the two become friends. Meanwhile, the operative team headed by ACP Rathore is working overtime to establish the links between hostile organizations who aim to destabilize India through acts of terrorism, the gun-runners in the local criminal gangs and the Chandrapur massacre. He puts together a team of specialists, though his attempts to ensure the participation of Inspector Salim (Mukesh Rishi) suffer a setback. Salim is an honest and upright police officer who is credited with the best intelligence gathering network in the force. However, a botched attempt at bringing in a notorious gangster Sultan (Pradeep Rawat) results in Sultan escaping and the death of three havalgars (constables). His superiors are furious at what they perceive as his recklessness and he is reassigned to a desk job. A distraught Salim believes that he is being victimized since he is Muslim and refuses to cooperate with Ajay, leading to some friction between the two. Salim however, comes up with a lead on Bala Thakur, when Ajay and his team seemed to have reached a dead end, and the two start working together. An encounter at the criminals' rendezvous results in the death of Bala Thakur and Ajay is seriously injured. Though Sultan and his right-hand man Shiva (Makrand Deshpande) manage to escape, the operation has deemed a success as the team is able to intercept a large consignment of lethal arms and ammunition meant for terrorist acts around the country.

The investigations seemed to have reached a dead end when a chance clue leads the investigators to Bhind in (Rajasthan) and to “Mirchi Seth” Rambandhu Gupta (Akshay Mishra). The investigative team save for Ajay and Salim camp in Bhind and gather all possible information on Mirchi Seth. Ajay comes over to Bhind to investigate and meets Gulfam who is temporarily staying in his ancestral manor near Bhind. The events unfold to reveal Gulfam to be the mastermind behind the intrusion of arms into India at the behest of Pakistan's Inter-Services

Intelligence (ISI). Gulfam attempts to derail the investigation through political means and ordering an assault on Ajay to subvert the investigation, but of no avail. The repeated failures on Gulfam's part displease the senior officers in Pakistani Intelligence, who dispatch Major Aslam Beg (Sri Vallabh Vyas) to subtly convey the message to Gulfam – perform or perish.

The investigative teams prepare for a final assault on the gun-running operation and in the pursuit of Mirchi Seth land up at Gulfam's mansion. Ajay feels betrayed when he learns of Gulfam's treachery but is aware of lack of substantial evidence to indict Gulfam for his crimes. He goads and tricks Gulfam into killing Baig and arrests him for the offense. Gulfam unable to stand the humiliation commits suicide and the team returns triumphantly to Mumbai to many accolades for busting the terrorist racket. At Mumbai Airport, the team (specifically Salim) is tipped off on the whereabouts of Veeran and they embark on another investigation.

A commercial film with spies and arms dealers on both sides of the border, an upright ACP on a mission to bust a terror outfit, a Muslim cop who is his best man and a *ghazal* singer who's a celebrity on both sides of the border but hides a secret and is used as a pawn, Sarfarosh had both nuance and originality. From the ISI (Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence) to Mumbai's underworld, from dusty non-descript villages and jungles to elite cultural soirees in metros, from the pain of the Indian Muslim who migrated to Pakistan after Partition to the plight of the Indian Muslim who needs to prove his patriotism, the film pulled no punches. Well, almost.

The scene between Aamir's ACP Rathore and Mukesh Rishi's upright inspector Salim, where the latter erupts at his integrity towards *mulk* under question for being a *Mussalman*, is a standout moment in Hindi cinema. Without beating around the bush, it exposes the insidious nature of mistrust. And remarkably for a commercial film, Salim's anguish is layered. Few would recognise this Rishi as Bulla of Gunda, the *baap* of the so-bad-that-it's-good genre of films.

Aamir and Naseer, in author-backed roles, are competent, though Naseer has a scene that'll get your goat. Sonali Bendre, as Aamir's arm candy, is suitably easy on the eye. Likewise, Jatin-Lalit's score is easy on the ear, with Jagjit Singh's 'Hoshwalon ko khabar kya...' evoking the warm blush of undeclared love. But if Sarfarosh merits a rewind, it's because it shuns easy jingoism, even for box office gold (Biswas, 2019).

In all, Sarfarosh would provide him with a blueprint to kind of films he would do later. Lagaan's Bhuvan, Rang De Basanti's Daljit 'DJ' Singh/Chandrashekhar Azad or for that matter, Dangal's Mahavir Singh Phogat would not have been possible if Sarfarosh hadn't happened.

#### 2. Dil Chahta Hai: Genre – Trendsetter:

Dil Chahta Hai (2001) brought a revolution in Bollywood. The movie came in like a rebel and changed things in Bollywood completely. The film did extremely well especially in urban areas and director Farhan Akhtar became as famous as a superstar. The film was known for its style, unique storyline, and brilliant execution. The film also brews up sagging careers of Saif Ali Khan, Preity Zinta and Akshaye Khanna, who were Aamir's co-stars in the film.

The movie tells the story of three friends graduating from college and transitioning into life as adults. Each individual has a different perspective on life and love in particular. Akash (Aamir Khan) does not believe in love and is of the opinion that one should never have a girlfriend for more than a period of two weeks. Sameer (Saif Ali Khan) is a genial, well-meaning, desperately romantic, and confused guy. He is prone to romantic infatuations and believes that he has found true love whenever he gets attracted to a girl. Siddharth (Akshaye Khanna), or Sid, is an artist by profession and is the most serious of them all; dedicated to his work, not interested in trivial romances and in a manner of speaking, attained modern-day enlightenment.

Akash is not only a cad in his personal life (breaking hearts, proposing to a girl named Shalini (Preity Zinta) in jest, but also a mischief-maker in his friends' lives. He craftily engineers a breakup between Sameer and his girlfriend and then plans a vacation trip to the beaches of Goa.

Sameer predictably 'falls in love' in Goa with a pretty Swiss girl, a story that ends in disaster. He returns home to find that his parents have arranged a meeting with a potential marriage prospect. He resists it as he does not want an arranged marriage, but the moment he sees the girl, Pooja (Sonali Kulkarni), he realizes that she is 'the one.' Unfortunately, she is already in a relationship with someone else and Sameer has to content himself with only her friendship.

Sid, in the meantime, befriends Tara (Dimple Kapadia), an older divorcee and alcoholic who has moved into a nearby house. He falls in love with her, though he decides to keep it secret believing that no one would 'understand' a relationship that would be considered scandalous in Indian society. Everything goes wrong when those close to him start finding out. Sid's mother is horrified. Akash's offensive remarks about this relationship create a rift in their friendship and they refuse to talk to each other. Tara hears that Sid has quarreled with friends and family because of her and feeling that she has ruined his life refuses to see him.

Akash is also experiencing romantic upheaval. His parents send him to Sydney to work for the family business. On the flight to Sydney, he meets Shalini again. He apologizes to her for his earlier prank and asks her to show him around the new city. Even though Shalini is engaged to marry someone else, she finds herself agreeing and they both, eventually, start to feel a certain 'something.' She presses him to tell her how he feels, but he refuses. She then declares that she is returning to India to marry Rohit, her fiancé. Akash lets her go, then realizes that he can't live without her.

Akash returns to India to win Shalini back. He proposes to her at her wedding, and in a nod to Bollywood tradition, she accepts with the blessing of her parents. Meanwhile, Sameer and Pooja start going out after she dumps her boyfriend.

Sid's story is more tragic. Tara is hospitalized with cirrhosis and dies with Sid at her bedside. Sid and Akash reconcile (with a little help from Sameer) and six months later, the three friends regroup in Goa where Sid meets a new girl. They share a smile and Sid realizes that life goes on.

The director seems to have adopted a subtle and fresh approach while narrating the story. The movie appears to have managed to capture the imagination of the whole new generation. The interconnected emotional journey of three friends tells three different stories of the same threads and genres. The story of three friends is told as a flashback. The movies underpay the collective emotions of friendship and focus more on the fractured emotions held by the individual characters. Every individual character in the movie has his own understanding of love and life. Eventually, all the three characters grow with the separation and rift for a short while. The film also allows viewers to focus on any of the characters at a given point in time. Dil Chahta Hai sets the trendsetting agenda for the contemporary Indian cinema. The versatile characteristics of each character were meticulously depicted in the movie keeping in mind the urban culture of the upper-class society (News18.com, 2016).

### 3. Mangal Pandey – The Rising: Genre – Historical:

Aamir Khan, a leading Bollywood actor, plays the lead role of Mangal Pandey. Pandey was a sepoy whose actions helped spark the Indian rebellion of 1857. The rebellion is known as "The Indian Mutiny", "The Sepoy Mutiny" or "The Sepoy Rebellion" by most of the English-speaking world. Indians refer to it as the "First War of Independence."

The film begins in 1857 when India was ruled by the British East India Company. Mangal Pandey (Aamir Khan) is a sepoy, a soldier of Indian origin, in the army of the East India Company. Pandey is fighting in the Anglo-Afghan Wars and saves the life of his British commanding officer, William Gordon (portrayed by Toby Stephens). Gordon is indebted to Pandey and a strong friendship develops between them, transcending both rank and race.

Gordon rescues a young widow, Jwala (Amisha Patel), from committing Sati (the act of following her deceased husband on to the funeral pyre). Afterward, he falls in love with her. Meanwhile, Heera (Rani Mukerji) has been sold into prostitution, to work for Lol Bibi (Kiron Kher). There is a spark of attraction between her and Pandey and a liaison follows.

Gordon and Pandey's friendship is challenged following the introduction of a new rifle, the Enfield rifled musket. In reality, as in the film, rumours began to spread among the sepoys that the cartridges (referring here to cardboard wrapped powder and shot, not metallic cartridges) were greased with either pig fat or beef tallow—an abhorrent concept to Muslim and Hindu soldiers, respectively, for religious reasons. British military drills of the time required soldiers to bite open the cartridge. The idea of having anything which might be tainted with pig or beef fat in their mouths was unacceptable to the sepoys of both religions.

In the film, Gordon investigates and is told to assure Pandey that the cartridges are free from pollution. Demonstrating his total trust in Gordon, Mangal bites the cartridge. But Pandey soon discovers that the cartridges really are greased by animal fat. The rumour of this imposed pollution is the spark that ignites the powder keg of resentment in the country. Mutiny breaks out, led by Pandey. The film ends with documentary footage of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

### CONCLUSION:

Aamir Khan is a chameleon when it comes to his roles and repertoire. The actor is known to vanish behind his characters and each of his films is dramatically different from the other. His 1999 film *Sarfarosh* that changed his choice of roles in the years to come. However, not only did Aamir ace the role, *Sarfarosh* would completely alter his image – from a romantic and comic star he would transform into an actor who picked up socially relevant issues and could excel in almost all genres. A number of films followed – 1947: *Earth*, *Lagaan*, *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (though *Mangal Pandey* wasn't a commercial success), *Rang De Basanti* and *Ghajini*. All these would seal Aamir's reputation as a commercially successful yet sensible actor, a go-to-guy for realistic roles within commercial cinema. (Mishra, 2019).

In an interview with *The Hindu* in 2005, Aamir was asked to compare his *Lagaan* role with that of *Mangal Pandey*, given that at the core of both characters was the fight for freedom. This is what he had to say, "Bhuvan is cool and level-headed,

while Mangal is a hot-headed reactionary. Though Mangal's character is historic, there is no record of his personal life. So the scriptwriters Farooq Dhondy and director Ketan Mehta took some liberties." Despite being a period film, Aamir says that the story of Pandey is extremely contemporary because it is based on the concept of freedom and one man's right to live with his head held high. "It is the tale of friends, lovers, and enemies, exploiters and exploited, and the growth and awareness of a man and a nation. The basis of the story is about how one man can change history? This sweeping epic is based on real historical events, seen as a trigger for Indian independence. It is extremely contemporary in the topic. Basically, it is the concept of freedom and the right of a man to hold his head as high as the other," Aamir said (News18.com, 2019).

Aamir in one of his interviews stated, "I am aware of the fact that I am in a creative field but there is a business aspect to it and I would never be impractical." Not surprisingly, even when Aamir, the actor, has pursued unconventional films, he has neither lost sight of their commercial success nor has he compromised on his creative values. Till today the prime purpose of cinema for him remains entertainment.

This highlights Aamir's concern as a star for social issues, becoming a sign for a change and thereby serving as a role model for the youth of his generation. Aamir has also deep concerns about the education system prevalent in India through his films like "Taare Zameen Par" and "3 Idiots" which he directed and produced. The drastic transition from the 8 packs in *Ghajini* and then in 3 idiots looking half his age, playing a college student is something that Aamir does best, this is a clear sign of his involvement in films which transcends the bounds of a normal actor.

Visionaries and trendsetters always have more enemies than well-wishers. Aamir Khan has always let his work speak with his versatile acting and awe-inspiring characters in his movies, and, therefore, he is remembered as a thinking actor of Bollywood.

After having a qualitative assessment of the three selected movies under study, it has become quite evident that Aamir Khan's films set the agenda of mainstream Hindi cinema. Through his movies, Aamir Khan is intended to sow seeds of awareness in the hearts and minds of the cinema-goers as to how messages may be reaped by watching quality movies and societal change may see the light of the day.

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